

## The perceived costs and benefits of pet ownership for homeless people in the UK: practical costs, psychological benefits and vulnerability

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The Perceived Costs and Benefits of Pet Ownership for Homeless People in the UK:  
Practical Costs, Psychological Benefits and Vulnerability.

**Abstract**

We sought to understand why many homeless people own pets despite the associated costs. Thematic analyses of interviews with seven homeless pet-owners indicated that interviewees perceived—not always accurately—that their pets limited their mobility and access to services. However, this was seen as a worthwhile cost for the companionship and sense of responsibility their pets provided, which increased resilience and enabled a reduction in substance abuse. Pet ownership also rendered interviewees psychologically vulnerable as the loss of a pet was highly traumatic and ignited coping mechanisms. We discuss the implications for homeless support services in the UK.

**Keywords:** Homelessness; Pets; Rough Sleepers; Psychological support,  
Vulnerability

## **Introduction**

The UK is currently in the midst of a homelessness crisis (Gallagher, 2015). The number of rough sleepers—those sleeping on the streets—in London has more than doubled since 2009-10, increasing from 3,673 to 8,096 in 2015/16 (Crisis, 2017). At the start of 2015, 13,520 families were accepted as statutorily homeless (Gallagher, 2015). In 2015/16, 114,790 households applied to their local councils for homeless support (Crisis, 2017). Among those defined as homeless, studies estimate the proportion who own pets as between 3% (Crisis, 2002) and 23% (Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2015). This is despite the costs associated with pet ownership, and that many homeless shelters and temporary accommodations do not offer places for those with pets. In this paper, we investigate the perceived costs and benefits of pet ownership through interviews with seven homeless pet owners in the UK.

## **The Role of Pets for the Homeless**

There are clearly economic costs associated with pet ownership. There are no statutory benefits available simply for owning an animal (Gov.UK, 2015) and an owner must cover the cost of their pet's food and veterinary bills (a struggle for some homeless people; Kidd & Kidd, 1994; cf. Irvine, 2013). There are also important practical costs of pet ownership that limit the supportive facilities that homeless people can access. In the US, homeless pet owners report having been refused housing because of their pets (Singer, Hart, & Zasloff, 1995; see also Strand & Cronley, 2009), and that pets limit their access to shelters and housing (Rhoades et al., 2015). In the UK, only 37 of London's 222 emergency and secondary homeless accommodation projects accept dogs, and, in Manchester, only three do (Homeless Org, 2017). Pets also limit access to transport and medical facilities: Public transport often prohibits pets and is thus inaccessible for homeless pet owners (Aliment,

Rankin, & Lurie, 2016; Slatter, Lloyd, & King, 2012), and 11% of homeless pet owners in one US study reported that pet ownership made it more difficult to see a doctor (Rhoades et al., 2015). Worryingly, homeless pet owners have been found to be less likely to use medical care facilities than homeless people without pets, *despite* having worse health (Taylor, Williams, & Gray, 2004), implying that pets restrict homeless people's access to important services and facilities.

With these costs associated with pet ownership, why is it that so many homeless people own pets? The answer may well be that homeless people perceive the psychological benefits of pet ownership to outweigh any costs (Singer et al., 1995). Homeless people face stigma, discrimination, and social rejection (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012), and their relationships with other humans are often disruptive, distrustful, associated with substance abuse, or even abusive (Irvine, 2013; Nyamathi et al., 1999; Rew, 2000; Stephens et al., 2014). With interpersonal interactions and relationships characterised by such negative attributes, pets may offer solace to homeless people. Indeed, homeless pet owners report that their pets provide companionship, reduce isolation and loneliness, and contribute to emotional well-being and meaning in life (Bender et al., 2007; Rew, 2002; Slatter et al., 2012). Supporting these perceptions, empirical studies have found that homeless pet owners are strongly attached to their pets (Singer et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 2004), and report lower levels of depression and loneliness than homeless people without pets (Rhoades et al., 2015).

Pets also provide homeless people with feelings of responsibility and safety (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). Irvine (2013) reports that pets are often central to the personal narratives of homeless pet owners and that they encourage and reward responsibility. Pet ownership was associated with fewer lapses into risky behaviours

and the development of a sense of self-worth and a positive moral identity.

Furthermore, pets seem to provide people with the psychological resilience and empowerment to kick long-standing drug addictions, and even to avoid suicide (Irvine, 2013). Pets, then, seem to offer psychological nourishment to homeless people, which may be perceived as outweighing any associated costs.

Some homeless people do sacrifice their pet for access to services, but later describe the experience as evoking guilt (Slatter et al., 2012), being painful and traumatic, and leading to negative consequences for both themselves and their children (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). Many homeless people may avoid this pain and trauma and opt to forego access to some services to reap the psychological benefits their pets offer them. We investigate this in a rare UK study of pet ownership among the homeless.

### **The Present Study**

The above review suggests that, while pets are associated with costs for homeless people, they may help to satisfy some psychological needs and enhance well-being. There are, however, few studies that have directly investigated homeless people's perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with pet ownership, particularly within the UK. This is an important research area given the high proportion of service providers who do not offer services to those with pets; a particularly worrying policy if pets do indeed offer psychological benefits to homeless people. We address this issue in the current article. We interview seven homeless pet owners about their experiences of owning pets, and the advantages and disadvantages of doing so.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

We recruited participants from two homeless accommodation providers and a homeless daycentre, based in two English cities. These service providers publicised the study to the service users who owned pets and who might be interested in participating in the study. We then gave and read an information sheet to people who expressed an interest in the study, and discussed it with them. Those who wanted to participate were given and read a consent form, and only those who signed this participated. Five men and two women participated in the study, all of whom were homeless and above the age of 18. Six resided in homeless accommodation, and one was rough sleeping. Five participants owned dogs, one owned a rat, and one's dog had recently passed away. We followed the advice of the service providers involved by offering all participants a small gift for taking part, usually a dog toy.

### **Interviews and analyses**

We conducted individual interviews in isolated rooms, with or without a member of staff present, as requested by the interviewees and shelter staff. The interviews were semi-structured and covered several different areas related to pet ownership and homelessness. We developed the semi-structured interview questions by discussing the research aims and background literature, and identifying the following themes that we deemed important to address, each of which contained several questions:

Background information (e.g. "how long have you had your pet?"); facilities and financial situation ("how often do you use daycentres or hostels?"); benefits of pets ("what were your reasons for getting a pet?"); costs of pets ("have you ever been turned away from a hostel for having a pet?"); homeless community and the public ("do you think your relationships with other people would be different if you didn't have a pet?"); and self- and public-perceptions ("do you think having a pet changes how other people see you?"). Interviews lasted between 17 and 45 minutes.

We analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis, which seeks to identify patterns in the transcripts that can be interpreted in terms of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We chose this method because it was appropriate for our sample size (Fugard & Potts, 2015) and enabled us to hold some prior expectations about which themes may emerge without being limited by these preconceptions when actually performing the analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's guidance, the analysis itself involved a number of stages. We first conducted immersive readings of the transcripts, followed by systematic, fine-grained coding of the text into meaning units relevant to our areas of focus (Willig, 2013). We then began systematically categorising, merging, and updating the units to identify themes. Once we had a provisional list of themes, we checked the coherency and the textural support for each, updating where necessary. We repeated this until we were satisfied that our themes sufficiently reflected the complexities of the raw data (Willig, 2013). Throughout this process we adopted a deductive and inductive approach, using our research objectives to guide our coding while ensuring that all codes and themes were clearly rooted in the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013; Yardley, 2000). By maintaining this balanced approach, and retaining an awareness of our own theoretical position in relation to the data, we sought to contain some of the potential bias that may have arisen by analysing data which we had also collected.

## **Results**

Analysis identified three over-arching themes related to homeless pet ownership: Practical Limitations, Psychological Benefits, and Psychological Vulnerability.

### **Practical Limitations Associated with Pet Ownership**

Analysis indicated that there were a number of practical limitations associated with homeless pet ownership. Interviewees spoke of the difficulty of accessing homeless



resources whilst owning a pet and referred to the negative impact that pet ownership had had upon their mobility. We deal with each of these issues in turn.

**Limiting access to services.** Analysis found that pet ownership made it harder for interviewees to access resources designed to ameliorate homelessness, which, in some instances, prolonged their homelessness. For example, in Max's case, owning a dog had directly prevented him from obtaining accommodation:

*Max: I was told by... all the people that were dealing with the homelessness and that, that I probably be break... you know... breaking my chances of getting into somewhere else [by owning a pet].*

For Alex, owning a pet had not only prevented him from obtaining accommodation, but had also obstructed him from accessing additional support.

*Researcher: How do you think your experience of homelessness would have different [sic] if you didn't have her with you?*

*Alex: Unfortunately I think I would have been housed... and probably have gotten into rehab or detox as well, a lot... sooner*

Alex's experience is significant when one considers that substance misuse often maintains homelessness (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). While being unable to access accommodation will maintain an individual's physical homelessness, being unable to access detox services arguably retains an individual's connection to some of the more experiential aspects of living on the streets (such as

substance misuse). In combination, both of these factors seem likely to extend an individual's homelessness and therefore represent significant burdens of pet ownership.

Whereas Max and Alex suggest that the barriers to accessing resources faced by homeless pet owners stem from others (e.g. housing providers), Wayne provides an illuminating counterbalance to this.

*Wayne: There's a lot of accommodations that [ ] I'm excluded from because of the fact that I have a dog like, d' you know what I mean? They don't have to tell me they're published as fact like, d' you know what I mean, you know?'*

Here, the barrier facing Wayne is internal; as a result of owning a pet, he *imagines* that he will not be able to access accommodation. Indeed, Claire also had this perception: *"I didn't even know that there was hostels that took dogs until I come 'ere. I was so shocked"*. Given the importance that engagement plays in successfully resettling homeless individuals, this is particularly concerning (Bassuk, Elstad, Jassil, Kenney, Olivet, 2010). This builds on previous research by demonstrating that pet ownership is associated with less service use not only because of real restrictions (e.g. e.g. Singer et al., 2012), but also because of the (not always accurate) *perception* that services are not available to homeless pet owners.

**Impacted mobility.** A further practical limitation of owning a pet related to mobility. Many owners spoke of their movements being slowed, altered, or obstructed by their pets across different situations:

Claire: *I can't do anything without 'er. Cos these phone me and start moaning 'Your dog's barking ... [inaudible] ... you got come back.' But I could be all the way in [name of another area] at my partner's 'ouse or something like that and... they're phoning me to come back*

\*

Wayne: *I feel a certain urgency about my situation [ ] I'm on an almost constant mission to sort my life out really [ ] it's like something may come up and I have to go to here, there or wherever [ ] But all he'll [his dog] be interested in is sniffing around everywhere else'*

In both these extracts, pet ownership is perceived as limiting mobility and even as a barrier to moving away from homelessness. Unlike previous research that found pets reduced mobility because they limited the use of public transport (Aliment, Rankin, & Lurie, 2016), our interviewees reported their mobility was limited by their pets' behaviours. As the below extracts show, some, like Claire, perceived this as a cost that was not worth bearing, whereas others, like Tony, saw the benefits as far outweighing this cost:

Claire: *I'd never get another one again, put it that way [ ] because of what I said about taking 'em everywhere an' that'*

\*

Tony: *She slowed me down yeah [ ] But didn't bother me. She were only thing on m' mind'*

Homeless pet owners therefore seem to be fully aware that their pets are limiting to their mobility and even progression away from homelessness, although, for some, the commitment they feel to their dog means that these limitations are readily accepted.

### **Psychological Benefits**

A central benefit of homeless pet ownership related to the positive impact that pets had upon their owners' psychological state. This over-arching theme was composed of two sub themes; resilience and responsibility.

**Resilience.** Interviewees believed that their pets had a beneficial impact on their psychological states, enhancing their resilience primarily because of the support and companionship they offered in the face of ever-present loneliness and trauma (see Irvine, 2013). Many of the interviewees spoke of the companionship and love their pets brought them:

*Max: Yeah it's a long day an' it's a long day being lonely. You know? So I'm never lonely if I've got the dog.*

\*

*Sean: I've got someone there all the time... [ ] when yer need the love they give you the love.*

In the face of trauma and loss, this companionship was perceived to translate into support, which had beneficial consequences for interviewees' resilience.

*Emma: Whatever I go through, she comes through with me. And sometimes it can be horrible things, but sometimes it can be...OK. ... I wouldn't be without any of the dogs cos they... her [my dog's] mum has kept me alive.*

\*

Sean: *I had a breakdown just after Christmas [ ] And do you know who got me through my breakdown... [his dog] Buster ...*

\*

Tony: *I ended up suffering from Paranoia, Schizophrenia, Mental Memory Loss, things like that through medication were on and everything... So... there weren't a lot could do. Getting her like... boosted me up 'n' I did everything for her and she did everything for me. Sh' were beautiful. ... She looked after me as much as I looked after her*

Given that pets often helped our interviewees to overcome loss, it is tempting to argue that animals act as a substitute for those whom interviewees have lost, particularly given as pets were often anthropomorphized. However, we should be cautious about drawing such conclusions: Several owners appeared to appreciate their animals especially for their differences—rather than similarities—to humans:

Researcher: *What do you think are the main things that she brings you? [ ]*

Alex: *Comfort, companionship, friendship, loyalty. Things which you can't really get out of people most of time nowadays*

\*

Researcher: *And can you think of...any other benefits that she's sort of brought to your life?*

*Claire: Uh... everything really. From bored, and takin' 'er out. She'll come anywhere with me without even moaning an' that. An' just being there j... I can't I can't explain it. Just being there an' having an animal so you're not always just sittin' in the house doing nothing all the time. You always got something to look after. But... someone's depending on you, if you get what I mean?*

Indeed, although social support is among the strongest predictors of well-being among non-homeless populations (Uchino, 2009), extreme poverty is often associated with poor interpersonal relationships, characterised by a lack of companionship, trust, love, and support (Nyamathi et al., 1999; Rew, 2000; Stephens et al., 2014). This was the case for our interviewees, many of whom had had negative experiences in their own interpersonal relationships which, in some instances, were characterised by betrayal. Such detrimental relationships frustrate rather than satisfy psychological needs, which our interviewees dealt with by seeking succour from their pets.

**Responsibility.** The interviewees reported that they proactively changed their behaviour because they felt responsible for their pets' welfare. Indeed, several owners associated pet ownership with a reduction in their own self-destructive behaviours. Interviewees explained the connection between pet ownership and behavioural change through their sense of responsibility towards their dependant pet, and the anticipated or experienced guilt at seeing or imagining the consequences of their actions upon their animals:

*Wayne: He helps me... stay balanced.... he does help me kind of keep my head together. When... when I... I just wanna... I dunno... Just go mental*

*or something like... he will back away. An' he'll maybe take himself over to a completely... a space well clear of me, like... And... when I see that... you know, and I see 'Oh shit, my dog's getting frightened by my actions' ... You know... then that sort of... forces me to look.... you know, look 'It's OK Duke, you're alright' it brings me down, as well like.*

\*

*Emma: Was only the dog that kept me...Not going into 'em and all that, and not getting arrested and doing crime and stuff cos I had the dog to worry about*

\*

*Max: My general demeanour was... really, erm, I was in a bad form... With the other one [previous dog] I was quite often seen... hanging out of quite heavy lagers. Nine, 10 percent lagers... because of my last one going missing... when I got this one yeah I started cutting down on the drink... Cos I'm not gonna make any mistakes... ever again like, you know. As far as it come down to her, I gotta be on the ball all the time*

These extracts suggest that the interviewees were aware that they were responsible for their pets, and that this gave them impetus to move away from their destructive behaviour. However, it is important to note that, in addition to their pets, our interviewees often needed additional forms of support, such as detox services, to instigate and maintain these behavioural changes.

Nonetheless, our interviewees experienced the dependency of their pet and their responsibility towards them as extremely positive, as Claire's extract illustrates:

Claire: *Where I've lost my children an' all that through... drug abuse [ ]*  
*it's nice to have [my dog] ... depending on you [ ] knowing you fucked up*  
*before*

...

*You always gotta do something be i... it's either 'er tipping 'er bowl up or*  
*the rat... spying on you... at the corner of your eye in cage, wanting to*  
*come out or somethin' [ ]*

Researcher: *If you, if you didn't have her do you think...?*

Claire: *I'd be bored shitless [ ] There'd be a big hole*

For Claire, looking after her pet endowed her with a general sense of purpose that she was unable to find in other areas of her life, and which she highly valued. This is likely to have positively contributed to her well-being (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2012), and helped to alleviate some negative aspects of everyday life that have been argued to be particularly prominent and detrimental for the homelessness (Rowe, Wolch, 1992; Gory, Mullis, Ritchey, 1990).

### **Psychological Vulnerability**

Whilst a core benefit of pet ownership was that it helped interviewees to cope with traumas, it also increased their vulnerability to loss and the negative emotional consequences associated with it. Indeed, several interviewees lost their dogs whilst



homeless. This was invariably an overwhelmingly negative experience, often eliciting coping strategies to minimise the impact of the loss:

*Tony: But she... just walkin' across road and she slow on lead yeah?  
[starts to cry]. This car came from fuckin' nowhere just smashed m... just  
died in my fuckin' arms... it were far too much to handle...*

*...*

*But like I say I got her in animal sanctuary. And gonna make her look  
yeah... close her eyes so she's fast asleep so I can put her in a basket ...  
that's gonna take me about eight month to pay t' to pay... to get her back.  
But when I have back she's gonna be curled up in basket so she'll she'll  
still be with me.*

Tony experienced this loss as too much to bear. His commitment to his dog opened up a vulnerability that he may not have had without her, and, when she died, he suffered a great deal. His plan to get his dog's cadaver stuffed suggests he is still engaging in defensive coping strategies to cope with this loss.

Although Max's quote in the above section indicates that his experience of loss motivated him to reduce his drinking, in the immediate aftermath of the loss, he reported that "[I] Really was down. That down. That I was thinking 'What's the bleedin' point?' You know'". The profoundly negative impact that losing a pet had upon interviewees complicates the notion that pets acted predominantly to promote the positive psychological well-being of their owners. Whilst the formation of an attachment to an animal appeared to confer a number of psychological benefits for owners, the loss of this attachment was experienced as a form of trauma.

### Discussion

Our analyses revealed that pet ownership among the homeless was associated with both advantages and disadvantages. Pets limited their owner's actual and perceived access to support services and their daily mobility, yet also provided companionship and helped their owners to cope with trauma and loss. Pets also provided a sense of responsibility, which motivated our interviewees to regulate and moderate their (destructive) behaviours. Our findings therefore cohere with Irvine's (2013), who found that pets acted as lifechangers and lifesavers for her homeless interviewees. However, we also extended Irvine's work by demonstrating that pets made their owners vulnerable to the devastating consequences of pet-loss which, despite being a fairly common occurrence, was experienced as highly traumatic.

The interviewees reported that their pets prevented them from accessing particular support services, and that they often willingly forgave these services in order to keep their pet. Although many local support services did not provide services for those with pets, several did, which makes this finding particularly worrisome: homeless pet-owners *perceived* that they could not access support services because of their pets, despite several options being available to them. This is a serious concern; many homeless pet owners reap significant benefits from owning a pet, which they believe they have to give up in order to access services that may help them to move away from homelessness. Such policies and/or perceptions may be prolonging homelessness, and should be urgently evaluated.

We also found that pets limited the mobility of our interviewees because of their behaviour. Whereas some found this frustrating, most found this only a trivial annoyance compared to the benefits of pet ownership. Indeed, for the majority of the interviewees, the psychological benefits that pets conferred clearly outweighed any

practical limitations. One of the primary benefits was a sense of companionship and love, which was perceived as enhancing well-being and resilience in the face of loss and trauma. Moreover, pets brought relief from some of the everyday stressors of being homeless, such as daily waiting, boredom (Rowe & Wolch, 1992), and loneliness (Rew, 2000).

Interestingly, our interviewees seemed to value their pets for their differences to humans, relationships with whom had often been characterised by conflict, neglect, and frustration. Interpersonal relationships are often troublesome for those with very low socioeconomic status (Nyamathi, et al., 1999; Stephens, Cameron, & Townsend, 2014), whereas pets offered our interviewees a much more reliable, dependant, and comforting companion than many humans, increasing their resilience in the face of some devastating traumas and losses. However, we also found that pets make their owners vulnerable to the negative consequences of pet-loss. For our interviewees, pet loss was a profoundly negative and traumatic experience that was harmful to their mental states and triggered coping strategies similar to those adopted in instances of human bereavement (Schut & Stroebe, 1999). Homeless support services should be aware of this vulnerability among homeless pet owners, and offer support services that directly tackle this potential trauma.

Importantly, the interviewees reported that their pets motivated them to regulate their behaviours, particularly their substance abuse. This is an important novel finding. Because of the responsibility they felt towards their dependant pet, the interviewees were motivated to curb their destructive behaviour to enable them to effectively care for their pet. This sense of purpose not only provided a strong motivation, but was also experienced positively by our interviewees. Pet ownership

could therefore be an effective strategy for interventions that aim to lower destructive behaviours among the homeless.

Despite these novel findings, one must be cautious generalising beyond our specific sample. Although all our interviewees had a history of rough sleeping, they were all engaged with homeless support, differentiating them from many rough sleepers who are reluctant to engage with services (Teixeira, 2010). Furthermore, our interviewees experienced only one type of homelessness existent in the UK (Shelter, 2015), and the majority of the animals owned were dogs. In light of this, caution should be exercised when applying this study's findings to a wider, more diverse homeless population.

## **Conclusion**

In light of our results, the current policy norms and communications among housing support services for the homeless seems counterproductive. Pets confer psycho-social benefits to homeless people—something which is often the aim of homeless support services themselves (SHP, 2015)—but are often barred from shelters and services. Our findings suggest this could lead homeless pet owners to avoid accessing support services, prolong their homelessness, and increase their substance abuse. Presenting owners with an ultimatum of 'animal or accommodation' leads the majority to choose the latter, furthering disengagement and doing nothing to counteract the UK's growing homeless crisis. Clearly, we must take note of this and do our utmost to accommodate homeless people *and* their pets.

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